



Viewpoint

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Free-roaming Animals as Stakeholders in Responsible Tourism Development: A Commentary



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ABSTRACT: Free-roaming animals in tourism destinations present unique opportunities and challenges for responsible tourism development. These animals can attract visitors to lesser-known locations, revitalizing communities with tourism revenue. However, their ecological and societal impacts must be considered. Invasive species like feral dogs and cats threaten local biodiversity, while human-animal interactions pose risks of zoonotic disease transmission. Destination images can also suffer from noise pollution, aggressive animal behavior, and unsanitary conditions. Effective management of these animals involves integrating them as stakeholders in tourism planning, balancing their welfare with the needs of ecosystems and local communities. This commentary explores how responsible tourism principles can address free-roaming animals' ethical, societal, and ecological complexities. The application of community-based tourism planning, stakeholder theory, and innovative strategies are essential for fostering coexistence and transforming potential conflicts into opportunities. Future research should focus on developing comprehensive frameworks incorporating free-roaming animals into responsible tourism practices, ensuring their role as stakeholders in sustainable and ethical tourism development.

KEYWORDS: free-roaming animals; stray animals; stakeholder theory; community-based tourism; community development approach

Introduction

Free-roaming or feral animals live independently and are not constantly under human supervision (Liolios, 2019). Their presence can have both beneficial and detrimental effects on human societies and ecosystems. From a tourism perspective, a notable benefit is their ability to attract visitors to lesser-known destinations. For example, the number of international tourists visiting Ōkunoshima Island, Japan, increased from 378 in 2013 to 17,215 in 2015, primarily driven by the attraction of feral rabbits (Usui, 2022). These animals can revitalize communities that have lost their primary industries, bringing tourism revenue to support residents. Houtong, a small village in New Taipei City, Taiwan, once a thriving mining town, has become a tourist destination due to its numerous cats. These cases exemplify how free-roaming animals may transform a peripheral location into a booming tourist destination.

However, it is crucial to recognize that the presence of free-roaming animals can also present significant challenges. From an ecological perspective, species such as dogs, cats, or rabbits are often considered invasive in many destinations, potentially threatening local ecosystems. Their presence raises concerns about biodiversity loss and ecological imbalance, which responsible tourism must address. Public health concerns also arise from human-animal interactions, potentially leading to disease transmission. Residents or tourists feeding or touching feral animals can facilitate the spread of zoonotic diseases, posing risks to both local communities and visitors. This health dimension adds another layer of complexity to managing free-roaming animals in tourist destinations.

From a destination management perspective, the mistreatment of feral animals can negatively impact the destination's image among tourists. Additionally, the overpopulation of these animals may lead to conflicts and inconvenience for visitors. Studies have shown that free-roaming dogs, for instance, can produce noise pollution through excessive barking, engage in aggressive behavior, and create unsanitary conditions by scavenging in dump sites or begging for food. These behaviors potentially deter tourists from visiting or revisiting particular locations (Liolios, 2019; Schafer & Farnworth, 2020).

It is important to note that these issues are not unique to a single location but are observed in many communities where tourism is a crucial source of income. The prevalence of these challenges across diverse geographical and cultural contexts underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to investigating the role of free-roaming animals in tourist destinations.

Questioning the Role of Free-roaming Animals in Responsible Tourism

Free-roaming animals are defined as those that were once domesticated but now exist without direct human oversight (Usui, 2022). These animals experience varying degrees of human interaction and supervision. For example, free-roaming dogs can be categorized into three types: free-roaming owned dogs, which are owned but not always under direct control; free-roaming dogs without owners, including community dogs fed by the community but not owned by an individual; and feral dogs, which are domestic dogs that have reverted to a wild state (Beckman et al., 2014; Kachani & Heath, 2014; Liolios, 2019).

In the context of tourism, responsible management aims to minimize the negative impacts of tourism while maximizing benefits for local communities and environments, emphasizing local involvement, cultural sensitivity, and conservation (Cheer et al., 2021). However, the presence of free-roaming animals in tourism destinations introduces unique ethical, societal, and ecological challenges that complicate the implementation of responsible tourism principles. Addressing this global issue necessitates a reevaluation of existing frameworks used in responsible tourism studies, such as stakeholder theory, to incorporate non-human actors. While current research provides valuable insights, there is a critical need for specific studies addressing the multifaceted issues surrounding free-roaming animals in tourism contexts worldwide.

To advance this understanding, several critical questions must be addressed. For instance, how can free-roaming animals be conceptualized as stakeholders in tourism planning to optimize coexistence between animal welfare and authentic experiences, particularly in destinations with prevalent human-animal conflicts? What roles can Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) play in mediating relationships among tourists, free-roaming animals,

ecosystems, and local communities while addressing economic, environmental, and cultural concerns? How do interactions between free-roaming animals and tourists influence destination image, tourism experiences, and sustainable development?

Addressing these questions requires interdisciplinary approaches and rigorous academic inquiries, potentially employing mixed-method research designs to explore the complex intersection between responsible tourism practices and animal welfare considerations. This commentary aims to examine the dual impacts of free-roaming animals in tourism settings and stimulate further discussion in responsible tourism management.

Reflecting the Role of Feral Animals in the Tourism Context

Studies on the relationships between human society and the natural environment are extensive, with some paradigms viewing interactions positively. The concept of **ecosystem services**, which denotes the benefits humans obtain from ecosystems (Hernández-Morcillo et al., 2013), illustrates how animals regulate ecological processes that support human well-being. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) expanded this concept and introduced **cultural ecosystem services (CES)**, exploring non-material benefits such as spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, recreation, and aesthetic experiences. Empirical research has demonstrated the multifaceted nature of these services. For instance, Echeverri et al. (2019) categorized bird-related CES into identity, bequest, education, birdwatching, acoustic, and aesthetic experiences.

Conversely, **ecosystem disservices (EDS)** describe negative impacts on human well-being from ecosystem functions, processes, and characteristics. EDS can encompass a spectrum of phenomena ranging from natural hazards such as invasive species proliferation, ecosystem degradation, natural disasters, and social hazards (Wood et al., 2022). In the context of tourism, free-roaming animals in particular destinations can indeed produce negative tourism experiences. Beckman et al. (2014) found that most tourists reported that free-roaming dogs detracted from their vacation experience, especially when they observed mistreatment of the animals. Similarly, Liolios (2019) discovered that free-roaming dogs in a destination can create perceptions of an uncaring society or economic hardship, negatively impacting tourists' intentions to return. These findings underscore the importance of animal welfare not just for the animals themselves but also for the overall tourist experience and destination image.

The interaction between urban wildlife and tourists is not unidirectional. Tourist behaviors can also significantly impact animals. For instance, the mistreatment of feral horses at Corolla, North Carolina, is documented. Despite public education efforts, some tourists engage in reckless behavior, such as attempting to feed, pet, or even mount these horses, leading to injuries for both humans and animals (Gruenberg, 2014).

Managing the interaction between tourists and free-roaming animals involves balancing the ecological benefits these animals provide against the challenges they can pose to tourist experiences. As the industry evolves towards more responsible practices, future research should thus focus on developing innovative educational and engagement strategies that mitigate the negative impacts and enhance the positive contributions of free-roaming animals in tourism settings. As tourism researchers, we must ask ourselves how tourism planning can effectively integrate ethical considerations into existing responsible tourism management practices to transform potential conflicts into opportunities.

From Conflict to Coexistence: The Community-Based Approach

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for managing the impacts of free-roaming animals in tourism settings, as each destination faces unique challenges that require consideration at multiple levels: individual, community, societal, and ecosystem. This complexity aligns with systems thinking in responsible tourism studies, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various elements within the host communities.

At the individual level, stakeholder perceptions of specific animal groups can vary significantly. Strickland's (2013) study of international tourists in Bhutan revealed divergent views on stray dogs, with some perceiving them as non-threatening and appealing, while others considered them nuisances or potential hazards. Community-level perceptions add another layer of complexity. For instance, the feral chickens in Oahu, Hawaii, illustrate a dichotomy between resident and tourist perceptions, with locals viewing the animals as nuisances. In contrast, tourists often find them appealing (Beat of Hawaii, 2024). This disparity highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to managing human-animal interactions in tourism settings considering diverse stakeholder interests.

Community-based tourism planning, rooted in community development literature, may offer valuable insights for developing more effective management strategies. Christenson (1989) identified three primary approaches in community development: technical assistance, self-help, and conflict or confrontation. Each approach has potential applications in managing free-roaming animal issues in tourism contexts.

The technical assistance approach, characterized by top-down initiatives, can be effective in implementing strategies such as pest control, Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR) programs, public education campaigns, and legislative efforts. However, this approach may fall short of addressing local contexts. For example, extensive fieldwork conducted in coastal Mexico on village dogs provides a comprehensive understanding of human and stray dog interactions, revealing that these dogs are not merely "stray" but are integrated into the social fabric of the communities, interacting with both familiar and unfamiliar humans and playing roles within ecological and social systems (Ruiz-Izaguirre & Eilers, 2012). These findings challenge traditional management approaches and underscore the importance of incorporating local knowledge and perspectives into the policy-making process.

On the other hand, the self-help approach focuses on developing local residents' self-governance capabilities, which can foster confidence and competence within communities. This approach aligns with the principles of empowerment theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995) and can be particularly effective in promoting responsible tourism practices that consider locals, tourists, and animals. Finally, the conflict approach, as described by Alinsky (1946), involves facilitating dialogue among opposing groups to address social norms and justice issues. This approach can be particularly useful in situations with stark differences in stakeholder perspectives. Cui et al.'s (2021) study of macaque tourism in China illustrates how tourism practices intended to mitigate conflicts between community residents and feral monkeys can, paradoxically, sometimes intensify these conflicts. Their findings demonstrate the necessity of considering multiple perspectives and interests in tourism planning and implementation processes.

Integrating stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) into these three approaches may offer another angle to understanding these complex issues. Despite critiques regarding its complexity and

potential for conflicting interests, stakeholder theory remains highly relevant to responsible tourism management. It encourages a broader perspective, acknowledges diverse interests, prioritizes long-term value creation, and promotes ethical decision-making. This aligns with the principles of responsible tourism, which emphasize minimizing negative impacts while maximizing benefits for all stakeholders (Goodwin, 2011). However, applying stakeholder theory in this context raises a critical question: Can free-roaming animals be considered legitimate stakeholders, and if so, how can their interests be effectively represented in the negotiation process?

These considerations highlight the need for a holistic approach to responsible tourism management that integrates individual, social, ecological, and ethical perspectives. Tourism planning can progress towards more responsible and sustainable practices by fostering inclusive dialogue and considering the full spectrum of impacts arising from human-feral animal interactions.

Final Reflection

The management of free-roaming animals within tourism destinations presents a highly complex issue that requires a systematic approach. Existing research gaps—specifically the lack of theoretical integration, inadequate measurement tools, and insufficient consideration of individual and group differences—highlight the urgent need for a more consolidated and technologically advanced approach. Furthermore, the progression of studies on the role of free-roaming animals in the tourism context is not thoroughly documented, necessitating the development of systematic review papers in the future to address this gap.

To advance the field, a multi-dimensional framework could be developed, integrating theories from various disciplines such as environmental psychology, geography, ecology, sociology, anthropology, community development, and urban planning. This integration is crucial for addressing the diverse perspectives and impacts involved in the interaction between free-roaming animals and tourism. Additionally, developing feasible guidelines or indices to scientifically measure the effects of free-roaming animals at different levels within the tourism system is essential.

Methodologically, it is recommended to move beyond traditional research designs and adopt more adaptive and inclusive methodologies that reflect the complex realities of tourism destinations. The use of big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and GPS tracking can significantly enhance the understanding of animal movements and interactions within tourism contexts. These technologies can help anticipate potential conflicts and improve the responsiveness of management strategies, enabling more proactive and adaptive approaches.

For practitioners, embracing the principles of responsible tourism is essential for developing businesses that prioritize environmental integrity, social responsibility, and effective governance, especially in managing free-roaming animals. Integrating regenerative tourism initiatives can be highly beneficial. For instance, some animal care programs allow tourists to take dogs from local shelters for walks, providing much-needed exercise and socialization for the animals while enhancing the visitors' experience. These activities not only benefit the dogs, who often return to the shelter more relaxed, but also offer volunteers the joy and emotional uplift of interacting with the animals. Additionally, such programs help local shelters gather valuable insights into the dogs' behavior in various environments, aiding in the

adoption process. These initiatives transform the challenge of managing free-roaming dogs into opportunities to attract tourists seeking meaningful and enriching experiences.

Tourism scholars and policymakers should adopt not only responsible but also creative approaches when planning tourism activities, considering free-roaming animals as part of the tourism stakeholder group. This perspective ensures a future where both urban wildlife and human communities can flourish. Responsible tourism research should integrate community insights, theoretical grounding, and technological advancements while acknowledging free-roaming animals' intrinsic value and stakeholder role within the broader tourism system.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT 4.0 to enhance readability and ensure accurate spelling and grammar. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final publication.

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